

HAFAS Mobile Personal Timetable Software

by Blaine Bachman



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So, you've finally managed to afford your airline ticket to Europe with enough left over for a Eurail Pass, and you're looking forward to a couple of weeks of sightseeing, visiting friends, quaffing some brews, and riding the exquisite trains? Congratulations!

Over the years you've become pretty good at packing light (and leaving enough room to discretely bring back a few model purchases), but you're dreading having to tote around the train schedule booklets you'll need in order to make the best use of your traveling time. Worse yet, you'll have to figure out how to read them while paying attention to all the minute 'exception' footnotes that, if unnoticed, can turn an otherwise well-planned vacation into a tragic comedy of errors.

Enter HAFAS Mobile!

HAFAS is a suite of software products that enables you to access train (and connecting intercity bus) timetable information in electronic format on a portable electronic device. It's way better than a printed timetable because all you have to do is tell it where you want to go and when, and it responds with a list of options; it factors in the exceptions and footnotes of the printed timetable and only displays those itineraries that truly exist.

HAFAS is actually the engine behind many of the online trip planning services offered by several European railways and a few large municipal transit systems. Mobile, end-user versions of the product are available for a variety of technologies including wireless phones and both Palm OS®- and Windows® based PDAs. You can read more about the various options at the HaCon company website: http://www.hacon.de/hafas_e/mobil.shtml, but the free HAFAS software is downloadable only from one of the participating European railway sites; look for the links on the HaCon site.

If you're lucky enough to have a mobile phone that works in Europe, you can get up-to-date timetable information using your phone's text messaging (SMS) capability. If you have a Windows-based 'smartphone' (even without Europe-based phone service) and enough available memory you can install HAFAS-Smartphone using the CD available from the DB, SBB, and ÖBB. Unlike SMS, this solution doesn't require phone service because all the timetable data is installed on the phone. If you have a Windows CE based PDA, look for HAFAS-Pocket. For the rest of us there's HAFAS-Palm.

The Palm® is a Personal Digital Assistant, a small electronic device used primarily to store one's calendar and address book information. Before the advent of the BlackBerry®, iPhone™, and other smartphones, the various models of stand-alone Palm devices were among the most popular PDAs in the marketplace.

A Palm running HAFAS software is a useful trip planning tool. Chances are someone you know has a Palm sitting unused in a drawer somewhere. If not, there are plenty available on the second-hand market (try ebay, Craig's List, and local pawn shops). Do a little product research beforehand and make sure you get all of the necessary accessories including the charger, the synchronization cable/cradle, the manual, and the operating system disk. If necessary, the documentation and software can be downloaded from the company's web site.

HAFAS-Palm is a version of HaCon's web-based Personal Timetable product HAFAS-Print2Web. When accessed from one of the participating company's web site via personal computer, HAFAS-Print2Web creates a small downloadable file containing timetable information for travel between one pair of cities. HAFAS-Palm installed on the PDA allows you to search the timetable information and do some handy things with it.

If you are a new Palm user, before you can set up HAFAS-Palm you need to install the Palm OS software on your personal computer, charge the battery, set up the device following the manufacturer's instructions, and perform your first HotSynch.

With the Palm device now ready to go, download HAFAS-Palm from the web site of one of the participating railways; I found the SBB's English language site easy to use and understand. As with all Palm applications, place the software into the PC's Palm directory; from there it is automatically installed during the next HotSynch operation.

You are now ready to create and download your timetable files; again, I found the SBB's site easy to use. Following the online instructions; it's a simple matter of selecting a pair of cities, setting a time frame, and choosing what services to include or exclude. For example, one of the files I created included all train services, except high-speed, between Milano and Genova for the period 25 Sep-4 Oct (even though the FS is not a primary partner with HaCon, I was able to create HAFAS timetable files for travel between Italian cities using the SBB site). Note that unless you specify otherwise, the file contains timetables for both directions of travel!

Because HAFAS-Palm does not load the complete European timetable on your Palm, you have to consider each possible leg of your travels separately. For example, if I know I am going from Frankfurt am Main to München with a possible stop in Nürnberg, I must create itineraries for all three city pairs, Frankfurt-München, Frankfurt-Nürnberg, and Nürnberg-München in order to get the most out of the product. This shouldn't present a storage problem because the timetable files are amazingly small. So unless you're going to be in Europe for months, I recommend you set the time frame for each city pair to correspond to your European arrival and departure dates.

After downloading your city pair timetable files to the PC, perform another HotSynch to load them to the Palm. Finally, before using HAFAS-Palm in a 'real life' situation, change the Palm's clock to European time.

To use HAFAS-Palm, tap the icon at the Palm's applications window. If you've chosen German as your language, the screen will look like the one shown in the accompanying photograph. To display timetable information:

1. Pick the departure point from the first drop down.
2. Pick the arrival point from the second drop down (note that this will only show those cities that were 'paired' with the departure city in a downloaded timetable file).
3. Set your earliest desirable departure time and date (or tap 'Now' to default to the current time and date).
4. Tap Search.

After completing the selected search, HAFAS-Palm displays the Trips page showing all possible itineraries for the 24 hours following the departure time and date. If additional information or explanations are available, they may be viewed by tapping the notes at the bottom of the window. To see if the itinerary involves train changes, tap the Details tab. For an even more detailed itinerary, including intermediate stops, tap the Guide tab.

After you've done all this and chosen an itinerary for tomorrow's trip to Garmisch, the coolest is yet to come: Tap to highlight the itinerary; tap the Palm's menu icon; from the Trip menu select 'Add to Calendar.' HAFAS-Palm adds the itinerary to tomorrow's calendar, blocking the time period just like any other event or appointment. You can open the event, make additional notes, and even set the alarm to wake you in time to shower, pack, and walk to the station.

Buon Viaggio – Gute Reise – Bon Voyage!